FATHER LEDUC, V.G.

Sharing with Father Lacombe and Father Lestanc the distinction of being among the earliest of living missionaries in the west is the Rev. Father Leduc, V.G. who has for the past forty years been financial procurator for the Catholic Missions of Alberta.

Born in France he volunteered early to work in the Western Canadian missions and came out to Canada in 1864. In December of that year he was ordained at Ottawa University, and on April 25th, 1865, left Montreal for St. Boniface, arriving there just one month later. They went by rail to Kingston, to Detroit, to Chicago and Prairie des Chiens, thence by boat to St. Paul and nine miles further to St. Anthony's Falls (now Minneapolis), The party, which included Bishop Faraud returning from France where he had been consecrated, four other priests and some men for the MacKenzie district. They travelled by stage, drawn by four horses, to Fort Abercrombie and were four day's in going.

At Fort Abercrombie they joined a brigade of Red River carts with their provisions. They were welcomed to St. Boniface by Bishop Tache who was just then moving into the new house built after the fire. He had only two priests with him--Fathers Lestanc and Leflot. The parish here included about 1,200 halfbreeds and a few white people, and the Mission had already a good farm on the large grant of land given the missionaries by Lord Selkirk when he asked them to come to the Red River.

In the autumn of 1865 Father Leduc was sent to the Halfbreed Mission at Pembina where he stayed until the spring of 1867, at which time he came west to Edmonton. The party left St. Boniface on June 6th with a string of Red River carts in which were one year's supplies for the Saskatchewan missions. These consisted of tea, sugar, tobacco, bacon, a small outfit of blankets and clothing to pay the Indians who worked for them, and altar wine. To each missionary priest one and a half gallons of wine were allowed yearly.

The caravan made easy headway along the smooth prairie trail, but they had some difficulty in fording the rivers along their route--the Assinaboia, Qu'Appelle, Little Saskatchewan, the South Saskatchewan at Batoch, North Saskatchewan at Carleton and again at Edmonton where now is Walter's Mill. At Edmonton they found Mr. Flett temporarily in charge of the Fort, replacing Chief Factor Wm. Christie.

In 1867 Father Leduc found here several missionaries with well-established posts, around which wandering bands of Indians rallied. There were Father Lacombe at St. Paul des Cris, Father Remas at Lac St. Anne, Father Tissot and Father Andre at St. Albert, Father Maisonneuve and Father Vegreville at Lac La Biche, and Bishop Grandin, already appointed assistant to Bishop Tache was at Lac la Biche coming next year to St. Albert. Father Maisonneuve of Lac La Biche was a most energetic man who cut a road out for

himself and his Red River cart 200 miles from the mission to Fort Pitt, because he wanted to meet the caravan of goods coming from Winnipeg. In the MacKenzie district there were already Bishop Faraud and Father Grouard (now Bishop).

The new missionary immediately began his ministry at St. Albert replacing Father Andre who went with Father Lacombe to St. Paul de Cris. The next seven years were spent by Father Leduc at St. Albert. Every spring he accompanied the halfbreeds and Indians to the prairie buffalo-hunting, as this season gave an excellent opportunity for teaching the children during the day-time and of having long talks and night-prayers with the men each night, while the entire camp would attend mass each morning.

The hunters would take four or five hundred carts along with them and would drive out as far as necessary to meet the buffalo. One year they met an immense herd of hundreds of buffalo about three days out from St. Albert, and at t e usual rate of travelling--15 to 25 miles a day--this point was little over 60 miles distant. When the scouts had found the buffalo and the place of camping was decided upon, the guns were made ready, the horses caught and when ready to start the whole band of hunters knelt down with the priest, said an act of contrition for the sins of their life and with this preparation for death done, the captain of the hunt would announce the start. Then off the hunters galloped approaching the herd always against the wind, loading and reloading their old flint-lock guns as they

galloped, shooting at the buffalo. They had a horn of powder at the belt and carried the bullets in their mouth. Sometimes they loaded the gun so hurriedly that the bullet slipped down in the barrel and exploded causing serious injury to the hunter. They usually camped six or seven days in each place, as after the buffalo were killed the women took several days to prepare the meat, while the men looked after the horses, chatted and smoked or carried the wood and water for their womenfolk.

Such was the life of the halfbreed and Indian on the sunny prairie in the Golden Age of buffalo-hunting.

The terrible epidemic of smallpox in 1870 found Father Leduc at his post in the midst of it. He and all his companion missionaries at St. Albert were ill with the disease for some weeks but they recovered. Before the smallpox came the population of St. Albert settlement alone was about 500. But before the plague ceased 300 of these had been buried in the prairies or at the mission, for the halfbreeds had very little powers of resistance.

The first case of which Father Leduc knew was that of a Metis woman living on the prairie where Strathcona is now. He answered a sick call and found her ill with smallpox. She died a few days later. That was toward the end of July, 1870, and from that until the following January there was one long weary series of illnesses and deaths. Every day the missionaries--Father Leduc and Bourgine, and Brothers Doucet and Blanchet--had to attend 30 or 40

sick people. Bishop Grandin was absent during that summer at Ile a la Crosse and other remote missions, having left before the smallpox came. The plague which proved so deadly to the Indians and Metis was brought up from Montana, Father Leduc says, by Blackfeet trading there with more southern bands of Indians. It was carried to the Crees up here and on to the halfbreeds.

Some of the earliest settlers in central Alberta recall having their grain converted into flour at the flour-mill built on the Sturgeon River by the missionaries of St. Albert. But they rarely know the difficulties that were overcome before that mill was in operation regularly. First Father Lacombe built a four-horse power mill in 1867, with four horses operating it. But it did not work very well, In 1868 Father Leduc assisted by Brother Bowes, who was a very skilful man, built a grist mill on the Sturgeon River three miles west of St. Albert. They thought they had selected a favorable place, and its first trial was highly successful. It worked beautifully. But six weeks later high water came, the mill-dam broke and everything was washed away.

Not yet discouraged they collected the shattered equipment and in 1870 gave one Pat Curran the contract of building a mill three miles further west on a little creek falling into Big Lake.

"Who ran the mill this time?" Father Leduc was once asked.

"It never ran," he replied with a delightfully comical

smile. "We were so afraid of high water, that we put it where we had no water at all."

In the following year the mill was moved again to the south side of the Lake and was operated six hours every day, though to do this the missionaries had to gather enough water in the dam each night. In 1872 the water rose on the Sturgeon again, the mill-dam broke and the St. Albert bridge, built by Father Lacombe some years before, was swept away. Now thoroughly discouraged with the difficulties the missionaries succeeded in having the Lamoureaux brothers form a company with themselves, take over the old equipment, while they imported a planer, shingling machine and other machinery for a grist-mill. These mills were situated on the Sturgeon, 18 miles from St. Albert, and were successfully operated from the start.

In 1874 Father Leduc was transferred to the mission of Lac la Biche, the point at which the MacKenzie River missions got their supplies. He had charge of the store of goods and the boats in which the supplies were sent out each spring. It was during his stay at this mission that Brother Alexis of Fort Chipweyan was killed and eaten by an Iroquois Indian. This lay-brother of the Oblate order had been sent from Chipweyan by Bishop Farand to Lac la Biche where he was to build some more boats. He was accompanied by a halfbreed family, also by a little half-breed girl, an orphan who was to be placed in the convent school at Lac la Biche, as well as by an Iroquois guide who had come

years before from Cauhnawaga and who had been a long time employed by the missionaries. On account of the high water the party made slow progress, and at last they ran out of provisions. The half-breed family decided to return to Fort McMurray.

The Brother was so anxious to reach Lac la Biche where his work awaited him that he decided to push on overland. The little girl and the Iroquois accompanied him. Three weeks later the Metis family arrived at Lac la Biche, and of course visited the mission promptly, enquiring for their fellow travellers. Father Leduc knew nothing of them, but when told they should have arrived at the mission two weeks before he became alarmed and sent the half-breed back to search for them.

In ten days he returned with horrible news. He had found the Brother's skeleton buried under a few inches of sand but the gruesome part was that there was no flesh on the bones of the body. When he saw that he was afraid and fled back. Then Father Leduc sent the Brothers and half-breeds from the mission to go and bring in the remains. About eight days later they returned by boat with the bones of Brother Alexis.

On examination they found that he had been shot by a bullet in the head and all the flesh had been cut from his bones. A few miles from the place the skeleton was found they came on a camping place where the Iroquois had been cooking meat. They saw the pointed stick on which he

cooked it, and lying beside the fireplace were the mocassins of a little girl.

Nothing more was ever heard of the two.

In 1877 Father Leduc returned to St.Albert, being appointed a Vicar-General in 1879 and remained at work there until 1885, when he was transferred to Calgary where he was put in charge of St. Mary's church with Father Andre as assistant. He remained in Calgary until 1892, building St. Mary's church while there and starting a small provisional hospital for the Grey Nuns in 1891, which was the beginning of the present splendid hospital there. The church was opened on December 8th, 1899, on the occasion of Father Leduc's silver jubilee.

In 1893 Father Leduc returned to St. Albert and in 1898 was appointed pastor of St. Joachims' church, Edmonton, building the present church during his pastorate. In 1906 he returned to St. Albert where now in the fulness of his years this grand old man is spending his days peacefully yet still in pleasant activity.